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TO MONSIEUR DE BIENVILLE, DEBTOR

There are many entries in the credit column opposite the name of Monsieur Jean Baptiste Le Moyne de Bienville, for he was a dramatic personage who achieved much. In casting up this gentleman's accounts, it will be noticed that the picturesque items loom large. But there are also modest statements that deserve attention and offer interest, as, for example, the fact that it was Bienville who first recognized the need of providing for the education of the young girls of his Louisiana colony. A reckoning of all the debts that New Orleans owes her founder is a part of the acknowledgment which the city will offer when in this year of 1918, she celebrates her two hundredth birthday.

It was only eight years after the founding of *la Nouvelle-Orléans* that Bienville realized that the very success of his city had created two necessities: a hospital, and a school for girls. The desirability of segregating and caring for the sick had been plainly evident from the earliest days of the settlement, for the amphibious nature of the place made fevers a matter of course; and almost as inevitably, the vocation or avocation of all male settlers was fighting. Consequently, there was continuous need of a hospital, and a concomitant requirement of intelligent nurses.

The other matter that seemed obligatory was a school for girls: a need that is especially interesting in its unexpectedness. Less than a decade had passed, it must be remembered, since the founding of New Orleans; and this beginning was made on a land-and-water island a hundred miles up the Mississippi river, and furthermore in a part of the new world that had hitherto attracted explorers and adventurers rather than sober colonists. It continued to attract the transient seeker for gold or glory, and this natural drift of light and surface humanity was augmented by a prison and correction-house contingent from France. But somehow sober colonists, too, had come immediately and unceasingly to the new French city with the old French name, and in eight or nine years there were respectable fathers and mothers in sufficient numbers to demand authoritatively that

trained gentlewomen be provided as teachers for the daughters of the *principaux* of New Orleans. The education of the sons had presented no difficulty: they could be sent to France or, if the parents were poor, boys could attend schools conducted by the priests. But, says a chronicler, no mother would send her young daughters so far from home to be absent during the years when they most needed a mother's care; and the priests' schools were not open to girls.

Recognizing that the health of all his colonists and the contentment of the better and more stable classes must be preserved, Bienville determined to solve both problems at the same time by inviting a religious order of women to establish themselves permanently in New Orleans. Naturally enough, he thought first of the *sœurs grises* of his native Canada, but he was unsuccessful in his efforts to enlist their interest; and by the advice of Père Beaubois (the lately arrived Superior of the Jesuits), he next applied to the Ursulines of Rouen. Their ready acquiescence, however, was not the conclusion of the whole matter. The projected undertaking did not concern Bienville and the good sisters alone. The *Compagnie des Indes* must be consulted and persuaded and enlightened; and a formal treaty must be drawn up by the Company, submitted to the Ursuline authorities, and, if accepted by them, it must be signed by the officers of the Company and by the Superior of the Ursuline order in France as well as by the Superior of the little group of religious people who had agreed to go on the mission to New Orleans.

Now the corporation known as the *Compagnie des Indes* offers many a spectacular incident in history and economics; but in the arrangements with the Ursulines it appears prosaic only. The twenty-eight Articles of the contract are concerned with passage and pensions and the day's work: there is no recognition of spiritual ideals or ambitions, or of the unprecedented nature of the enterprise. A matter-of-fact reading of the Treaty makes the Company's point of view quite clear in regard to the projected school. Present-day New Orleans is apt to think that the reason for the coming of the Ursulines was primarily to teach girls; but the Treaty is a document in evidence to show that the

Company gave slight thought to that occupation. It was the hospital alone that interested the Company, as may be seen from the fact that only two Articles (a part of the Sixth, and the Twenty-fourth) out of the entire twenty-eight deal specifically with the education of girls. It is even especially enjoined upon the religious that though they may, when circumstances warrant it, receive boarding pupils, the Sisters in charge of the sick must never be detached from the hospital service. Clearly the Company intended the Ursulines to be sick-nurses, and if they should be teachers also, that occupation would be merely "for lagniappe," as we say in New Orleans to-day.

The Ursulines made no objection to the Company's provisions, and after a prodigal waste of red tape (one loop of which touched Cardinal Fleury and even Louis XV himself), the contract was concluded September 13, 1726. On February 23, 1727, ten Ursulines, two priests, servants, and a few workmen set sail in the *Gironde*.

That we know all manner of details in regard to the five months' voyage is due to the literary skill and the personal qualities of the Mother Superior, Sister Marie Tranchepain (delightful name), and of her secretary, Marie Madeleine Hachard, a novice at the inception of the mission but soon a member of the order. Both women had keen intelligence, an eye for significant detail, and a sense of humor. If, as we have been told, it is seldom possible to discover the time, place, and loved one forming an harmonious whole, it is equally rare that religious zeal, a sense of humor, and a literary artist are united. But spiritual enthusiasm, the voyage of the *Gironde*, and Mme. Tranchepain and Madeleine Hachard were made for one another. Things happened on that journey across seas, and the women who recorded the events or incidents knew how to observe, how to judge, how to put their impressions into written words. No day, apparently, was commonplace, but the happenings varied, of course, in degree and kind. Mme. Tranchepain may note mildly: "*Ce fut alors que chacun commença à payer le tribut à la mer*"; or she may observe that the regularity with which the soup upsets seems to be intentional; or there may be a good-natured gibe at the self-effacing novice (Madeleine Hachard, as

it happened) who carried the community principle so far that she persisted in referring to her own features as "our nose" or "our ear." But there are, too, pages that tell graphically of threatened attacks from pirate ships, of hurricanes; there are allusions to cannibal islands; there is casual mention of a scarcity of food and drink.

The little company probably drew a sigh of relief when the mouth of the Mississippi was sighted, though the entrance to the great river must have been then, as it is to-day, a depressing view. For some miles before the thin wavering gray line of marsh appears on the horizon, an incoming ship moves through heavy yellow water whose dullness of hue is especially noticeable after a voyager has for days been surrounded by the vivid blue of the gulf or the green blue of the Atlantic. The gray line on the horizon becomes steadier and finally resolves itself into a fringe of brownish-green rushes through which the muddy waters rise and fall almost as freely as out in the open gulf. At one spot the marsh separates to make a way, apparently, along which the insistent, heaving, tawny waters may sweep into the dim, mysterious wastes that are "land" only by geographical courtesy. It often appears, too, to be only geographical courtesy that permits the statement: "the Mississippi River flows into the Gulf of Mexico," for the tide rolls far within the level, tortuous passage grudgingly relinquished by the marshes. One would expect the mouth of as mighty a body as the Father of Waters to be an impressive sweep of open space through which a hurtling, spray-tossed current would burst with a deafening roar into the sea beyond. But, on the contrary, the Mississippi avoids a climax at its conclusion (though not averse to spectacular actions farther up its course), and the river slips into the gulf by five passageways so clogged with sandbars that it is a wonder the waters succeed in escaping at all. Nowadays, the jetties force the current to scour a channel through one of these passageways, but jetties are inconspicuous taskmasters and consequently have done little to alter the appearance of the entrance to the river.

Outside one of the passes the passengers of the *Gironde* waited until arrangements could be concluded for the last section

of the journey, which because of the sandbars at the entrance of the river must be made in small boats. To-day it is for the quarantine officer and the river pilot that we wait and, save for the little white cottage standing up on low stilts and the big white lighthouse on high ones, we see just what those long-ago pioneers saw: dun-colored waters beneath, blinding light above, and a flat, unchanging stretch of dullest green that reaches to the very edge of the world. The travelers left the *Gironde* gladly, we may be sure, though they left it to spend seven days in pirogues. To travel in a pirogue is at any time an uneasy experience for the amateur, but to travel in a pirogue piled high with wobbly luggage on which the passenger perches unhappily while someone stands and aimlessly (and, to all appearances, ineffectively) dips a paddle in the water is a real test of flesh, spirit, and specific gravity. Moreover, it should be remembered that the pirogues were being paddled against the current of the Mississippi river, and, too, that the trip was made in the month of August. There were days, so the records tell, of scorching sun and torrential rain; and nights spent on a land that was two parts water and a third part mosquitoes. But the Journal of the Mother Superior and the letters of her secretary do not dwell on discomforts; rather is the emphasis laid on the wonder of the broad yellow river and the strange, low-lying shores, where after the first two days moss-draped cypress trees began to take the place of the reeds and grass. And Madeleine can even speak tolerantly of the unceasing and ferocious attacks of *Messieurs les Maringouins*, or *Frappe d'abords*, as she calls the mosquitoes, usually adding a conjecture as to whether they really will succeed in "assassinating" her.

In the latter part of August, 1727, the Ursulines finally reached New Orleans, thereby concluding the necessary preliminaries for opening a school for girls in Bienville's city. The history of few schools can afford so interesting an introduction. This introduction should belong equally, of course, to the opening of a hospital, but it does not so belong because, in spite of the fact that the Company had definitely proposed that the hospital should be first and the school last, circumstances quite as definitely disposed that the last, in this case, should be first.

One of these circumstances, for example, had decreed that the *hôtel* of Bienville to which the religious were escorted by Governor Perier (Bienville had returned to France in the hope of justifying his management of the colony) should chance to be at the end of town farthest from the building that sheltered the "*pauvres malades*" to whom the benevolent Company had dedicated the services of the Ursulines; and it was absolutely necessary to wait until a residence should be provided near the hospital before complete and organized service could begin.¹

But, on the other hand, circumstances also decreed that more than thirty girls should be desirous of being received as boarders, and that many day pupils should be waiting anxiously to take advantage of the Sixth and Twenty-fourth articles of the Treaty. The school was inevitably started at once, and, it may be added, expanded at once, for besides the expected well-bred pupils and the regular convent instruction offered them, negresses and savages were received every day from one o'clock to two-thirty and were taught French, religion, and something of what we to-day should call the rudiments of domestic science. At once, too, the Sisters took into their home an orphan whom they found in special need of protection; and they even sought to help the Manon Lescauts of the colony.

It is evident that neither climate nor strange conditions affected the energies of these extraordinary women. Only eight months after their arrival, Madeleine Hachard writes to her father that the Ursulines are carrying on the activities of four communities: of their own, of course; of *hospitalières*; of St. Joseph; of a Refuge. Furthermore, they were soon called upon to act as guardians for the *filles-à-la-cassette*, those completely respectable maidens who were carefully selected by the ever alert *Compagnie des Indes*, provided with a dowry, and then sent across the ocean and up the Mississippi (in pirogues) to be the wives of the single and worthy young men of New Orleans. Still another responsibility was laid upon the Ursulines when, in 1729,

¹The hospital work was begun before the first year of residence was over, and it was as faithfully performed as conscience, kindness, and the Treaty could ask. In 1770, a papal dispensation released the Ursulines from the hospital service.

a number of children orphaned by the Natchez massacre, were brought to New Orleans and placed in the care of the Sisters,—the Company paying for the maintenance of the children. The good ladies, it would seem, almost duplicated a modern university with its plethora of colleges, schools, and departments.

No doubt the curriculum of this first school for girls in New Orleans was simple enough, no doubt books were few; but it is always, of course, the teachers themselves that count most in preparing young people to live their own lives, and even the stupidest little girls must have absorbed something of courage, persistence, initiative, and cheerfulness besides the religious zeal which was the fundamental reason for the coming of the Ursulines to New Orleans. Both the stupid little girls and the clever little girls needed religious teaching, but it cannot be denied that additional acquirements are useful in pioneer communities. Girls married in those days at twelve or thirteen and frequently went with their husbands far into the wilderness where every iota of the convent training came into use,—the religious first of all, we may suppose (or hope), but also the lessons of character, of commonsense, and of good humor.

In the early days of the establishment of the convent school, no girl was allowed to marry unless she had received instruction from the Sisters, and to this requirement—a clear instance of compulsory education—is due the firm and lasting impression made by these first teachers upon the girls of this Louisiana colony. And it is interesting to note that the educational roads built so strongly by the Sisters led away from the convent: recruits to the order came for many years, not from the convent pupils, but from France.

The particular quality which these first New Orleans teachers established in the training of girls was a constructive element. It was this faculty that made Mme. Tranchepain and Madeleine Hachard not only mention but explain the new things they saw or heard of. They try to show just where New Orleans is situated; they collect the various names for the Mississippi; they compare strange trees and flowers with familiar ones in France; and they have much to say about food,—a subject of vital interest to all travelers and to this day an inseparable part of New

Orleans "copy." They often include recipes in their explanations; though the fashion of baking sweet potatoes in ashes could be of little service in Rouen or Normandy. It is the teacher habit, too, of getting at an underlying truth that makes one of these women assert that the real wealth of Louisiana lies not in gold or silver mines, but in her natural resources.

To make you make yourself was, everybody remembers, the main article of Mother Carey's treaty with her chickens. Circumstances prevented Mother Tranchepain from knowing anything about the Water Babies, but she had much the same idea as to development of character that Charles Kingsley emphasized in his book. This constructive ideal in the education of girls has persisted. There have been a good many opportunities of testing it, for the chances and changes of this mortal life have come in generous measure to Bienville's city, and generations of girls have adapted and altered themselves to fit an environment that had turned upside down or inside out, seemingly over night. Schoolgirls saw the colony exchange French rulers for Spanish ones; saw the French return, and then learned that New Orleans had been transferred again and that her citizens owed allegiance to a country far more alien than Spain, the United States. Moreover, many families were affected by the terrible uprisings in San Domingo and Haiti, and most families suffered in some degree from the epidemics that came again and again to scourge the city.

With the coming of the Americans, new elements in education entered: a new language, new text-books, and, most disconcerting of all, new ideas. It is readily understood, however, that these innovations were not accepted in their entirety by creole educators. The English language was tempered, the text-books interpreted, the ideas adjusted. The schools of the Ursulines and of other religious orders that had taken root in the colony continued to flourish (as they do to this day); but there came into existence in the early nineteenth century numerous private secular schools, both French and English, where educators of girls had full scope for all the inheritance of constructive ability that pedagogic tradition could furnish. They were remarkable institutions, those New Orleans private schools for girls in the

first three quarters of the nineteenth century. With their French emphasis on logic, philosophy, and the technique of composition; their Spanish insistence on detail and formality; their American appreciation of mathematics and embryo sciences; and with, most of all, the personalities of the instructors building more and more stately pedagogical mansions in which was preserved the continuity of ideals which the pioneer teachers had embodied,—with all this, they offer copy enough for a book.

During the first three score years of the nineteenth century teachers of girls in New Orleans knew that their pupils must, in many cases, become the heads of communities as varied in occupation as imagination could suggest. The wife of a planter was mistress of an establishment which, properly managed, demanded a great deal of concrete knowledge and an inexhaustible supply of executive ability. Besides the care of her family (always a large one), the mistress must exercise unlimited hospitality, must supervise sewing rooms where hundreds of garments were woven and made up, must keep strict watch over a store-room which supplied both house and quarters, must visit and nurse the sick, and must watch over the morals and manners and recreations of perhaps hundreds of simple, childlike people. Constructive ability was at a premium.

It was these women who saw their world overturned in the sixties; who saw it demolished in the seventies. But they made their world anew. It was in their blood to construct themselves and their surroundings according to the material at hand, even though the making of their metaphorical bricks must be accomplished without straw. Somehow girls continued to be educated: the private schools revived, the public schools improved, and example and precept and tradition made girls “make themselves” better and faster than ever.

And then, in the later eighties, in 1887, there was organized in New Orleans a college for women. As a coördinate institution of a long-established university it was sure of a certain prestige, but even so, the founding of a modern college for women in a city of the peculiar atmosphere and traditions of the New Orleans of the eighties needed faith,—the sort of faith

Saint Paul defined as "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." But there was no lack of faith and, moreover, it was fused with untiring, unselfish work; the college, furthermore, in accordance with local educational precedent, proved itself peculiarly hospitable to a grafting of old conditions with new theories. During thirty years a constructive force, impelled by the past, guided by the present, directed toward the future, has not ceased nor even paused.

To-day that college is orthodox in entrance requirements and curricula; it is academically correct even to a chapter of Phi Beta Kappa and a place on the Carnegie Foundation. In so much is it a duplicate of any other first-grade college for women. But the student-body is not as easily duplicated. It is not only that they are organizers and executives to a woman,—most college women are that. It is something else,—an attitude to life. Back of these young people are nearly two hundred years of the hope and the gaiety of heart, and the labor and agony, and courage and sheer strength, of countless women of the past who preserved for countless women of the future the ideals of service to which the first teachers of girls in Louisiana gave life everlasting.

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